

Fortnightly Sermon

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CHICAGO, ILL.

VOLUME 3

No. 12

LOVE TO GOD

CHICAGO

THIRD CHURCH PUBLISHING COMMITTEE, 917 WEST MONROE STREET
1891

Entered at the post-office at Chicago as second-class matter.

FEBRUARY 15, 1892.

THE FORTNIGHTLY SERMON,
THIRD YEAR,

Contains Mr. Blake's current discourses in the pulpit of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago. It will be dated the 1st and 15th of each month, as heretofore.

This series will run to July 1,—twenty sermons in all.

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LOVE TO GOD.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God."—Matt. xxii, 37.

Here, and in many other places in the teachings of prophets and holy men, we are commanded to love God. Therefore, the pulpit rings with the same command. Often it is taught rudely, coarsely, and enforced selfishly. Then the soul revolts, if it have come to spiritual modesty, shrinking exceedingly perhaps from the love that is commanded.

Indeed, I have observed, if I mistake not, that there is a natural shrinking of the spirit from love to God when the love is enjoined as a duty and necessity. Even though it be delicately, graciously and beautifully urged, I have observed a shrinking from *the duty* of love to God. Indeed I know not what kind of love can be claimed as a duty without being shaken and confounded. For the precious things of love are not to be commanded but attracted. No physician can heal a flagging heart by saying, "Go to, now! beat and live;" nor can one arouse to life the spiritual heart by saying, "Go to, now! love; it is commanded!" And when especially we speak of love to God, we shrink from such a command because not only it is contrary to the nature of love, which is not to be ordered by decree, but also it is beyond our native power. We feel no such love in us; perhaps we have a fear or consciousness of incapacity thereto. Not only we love him not, we think, but we feel not able to that end. No love arises. We know not how to call it forth, or that we can; and to face it as a stern duty, as the most sacred of obligations, as the first and great commandment, is a hard thing. Often to sensitive natures no doubt it is a terrible thing, sometimes bowing them down to despair.

I can remember well my thoughts about loving God, when I was a child. From the pulpit, from my Bible, from my good

teacher with whom I lived away from home, I heard constantly of this duty. I was told that I *must* love God, with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. I must love him better than all that was dear to me. I must give my love deeply, fervently, with perfect devotion and self-surrender, with the heart's whole power and store. And my heart simply answered, "I cannot, I *cannot*". This love will not come. I cannot create it. When all is done that I can, I yet love my father and mother and brothers, and I love not God. Then I was told that this inability was the proof of a bad heart, because the natural heart is at enmity with God." Sinfulness, they told me, was choking the soul's power of loving the Maker, making it cold and hard unto him. But this frightened without helping me. For it gave me no power to make what can not be made, nor to call from the deep by will what cometh above will. Still I knew that I loved my mother and brothers the best. Nay, I could not see that at all I loved God.

But now, I have come to understand that my sorrowful and struggling sense of having no love to God sprung not from depravity of heart or sinfulness, but simply was a misunderstanding of the term. I knew not what love to God meant. A like misunderstanding I have found to be so common that the time, I think, will be used not ill this morning if I explain very briefly and simply what it seems to me love to God is in truth.

We will ask, then, first, What is love? Have you tried ever to analyse love? Have you asked yourselves ever what you do when you love anyone? The act of loving is a very complex affection, by no means simple and ultimate. Love always comprises two elements, and generally three.

First, love contains desire,—desire for the love of the beloved. Love always wishes to place its seal on the beloved and say, "*This is mine*." Love comprises also desires for the happiness, prosperity, safety and joy of the one beloved. All these desires form part of the complex act of loving.

Secondly, love commonly comprises respect or esteem. But this element not always is present. Sometimes a wife, more often a mother, will love unfailingly a husband or son or daughter whose riotous or desperate life consumes respect. But esteem commonly is present in the complex affection of love, and always

in blessed and happy love. Now, this element of esteem is a moral element. Esteem is reverence for high moral qualities inhering in a person. It is called forth by the contemplation of noble traits beheld in a living soul. It is declaration of merit or excellence.

Thirdly, there is yet the element which is primary in the complex act of love. Like desire and the moral sense, this element is ultimate, simple, individual, a primary power or faculty of us. I mean the indefinable somewhat which all feel but cannot describe, for which the best name is *Tenderness*. This I call an ultimate fact or power. It cannot be analysed. It streams in the soul of itself, by virtue of our nature. It eludes definition. It has no parts by which to be pictured or described. But every soul knows by experience this tenderness which flows out to others, inexpressibly, deeply, joyously, asking only to flow. Flow it will, without permission. Its justification is in itself. Now, this tenderness streams spontaneously and sweetly in response to what I may call *relations of nearness* between ourselves and others; the nearness of family ties of long acquaintance and companionship, of similar nature, endowments, tastes, aspirations, temperament. The kinds of nearness which call forth this tenderness are as delicate, indefinable, inexpressible as tenderness itself. Each person has a charmed circle, larger or smaller, but not very large with any, into which one must find the way and creep near in order to receive the precious abundance of the soul's high, pure, serene and unlimited tenderness.

These three elements, then, combine to form the complex affection and emotions of love as every day we feel them: Desire, which is the appropriating or egoistic element, arising from the wants of human nature and the privations of circumstances; Esteem, which is the moral and rational element, arising from the discrimination and judgment of the moral reason in respect to right, worth and goodness: Tenderness, which is the forth-going or altruistic element, arising by some relations of nearness to us in another being,—as the child's nearness to the mother, or the nearness of kindred spirits.

Now, it remains to ask, How stand these elements of love as related to God?

It is plain, first, that the element of desire must be put aside. God is Maker, Upholder of all things. Therefore nothing can be desired for him that he has not, nor is there aught that we could long for him to be that he is not. And we cannot desire to make him ours, since he is with us, our Father, at all times; nor can we desire impiously to call him all our own who is the Infinite Father of all creatures.

But again it is plain, secondly, that the element of tenderness must be put away. The relations of nearness to which tenderness responds imply always a certain equality, and often also nearness in place. There must be opportunity of presence and acquaintance, for the arising of tenderness toward any one. But God is the One, the Eternal, the Infinite, the Perfect. He fills all things. He is the life of the living and of the dead, the perfect Order, the all-infolding Spirit. He is, in truth, infinitely near, yet infinitely far also. And though we live and move in his being and are surrounded evermore by his presence, yet he is no nearer to any one than to another, and lives unseen, untouched, unheard save as each and all may see, touch and hear him in the prophetic recesses of the Spirit. Unto God, therefore, that tenderness cannot arise which depends on circumstances of special personal nearness. There is something even of irreverence and impiety, which all surely must feel, in professing unto God those same tender emotions which we pour forth on parent, brother, sister and friend.

The moral element, the element of esteem, therefore, is left alone. This toward God becomes veneration, aspiration, worship. This element not only goes out to the Infinite One, but only in the devotion unto him has its utmost attainment, and expression. It is reverence, awe, glorifying, trust. This to know and feel is to be moral and spiritual beings, children of God. It is pure religion. It is awe without fear, simple and pure.

Now, these reasonings lead us to see that love to God is not like human love, of friend to friend, comrade to comrade, or parental or filial; yet that rightly it is to be called love, because it is the utmost exaltation and power of that rational part, the moral element, the fine esteem and ethical reverence which lifts human love into its greatest glory and joy. Now, with this exaltation of moral judgment into a veneration, adoration,

aspiration, worship, which is love to God, go some other exercises of spirit which accompany human love also in all forms of it. These are Joy, Trust, and a constant living action of the Love.

Joy in love is very great. The greatest joy of it is in loving. "Depend upon it," says Sir Arthur Helps, "the most fatal idleness is that of the heart. And the man who feels weary of life may be sure that he does not love his fellow-creatures as he ought."

There is also a joy in being loved which waits on the other and greater joy like the bow-in-the-clouds on the sun and the rain. How precious and fair this makes human life! Nay, with what a pleasure we behold its exercise in our dumb fellow creatures! I know not that life can be conceived or is possible but by love. Certainly it were but a frozen zone where intelligence has hard struggle to live. But with love is light, conception, understanding, power to do anything, and a great joy. Now, this Joy goes likewise with love to God. The exaltation of the moral power of the soul into worship is a great joy. The perception of a holy perfectness, an Eternal Righteousness, Mercy, Justice, Providence, Peace, Beauty, and the uplifting of the soul to this sight of the soul with unspeakable worship is a love which is great joy.

Trust is another exercise of spirit which goes with human love and likewise with love to God. To have a pure and perfect trust in a friend—what a stay that is! What peace! What a source of the sense of power and strength! Such a trust attends love to God as what I have reasoned it to be,—attends with its utmost force and reason. When we have conceived and beheld what is of God,—Justice, Truth, Loving-kindness, Holiness, Peace, and all these Eternal, Infinite,—and unto this Perfect we look in adoration, worship, glory, here is a sea that will carry our Trust. We are full of the power of Trust. Then we cry, "He always wins who sides with God," "One with God is a majority," "Learn what God is like" and "Back with thine angel to the field and bravely do thy part"—"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Another exercise of our souls in our human loves is what I

have called the constant living action of the love. A true love is ever with us, like a waking guardian or a watchful administrator. Shall we do this act? What would our precious and revered friend say of it? Is this a good feeling, an honorable emotion? What if our beloved were looking on it? These reflections attend always a very high kind and joyful faculty of love in human life. This same constancy of presence and action attends love to God. For this love is worship, adoration and joy, with holy awe. In measure as thus we feel unto Eternal Holiness, all temporal evil will be rebuked. We can not know and have in us this love unto God without feeling constantly that, "however things may seem, no good thing is failure and no evil thing is success." Love to God is that worship and praise unto the goodness of God which arise in us always by their pure force, if ill things solicit us, to answer them, saying, "No, ye cannot live before *His* face, and therefore ye should be foreign to me."

One great joy and support there is in love to God which exists not in our human loves, namely, the immanent and unfailing presence of God. We may miss a human friend sorely. We may long for his presence unutterably when we can not have it. Perhaps sad conditions part us, or seas roll between, or death, so like to the sea, "which divides and yet unites mankind." Or if we may see our beloved sometimes, yet it may be rarely and for a period very short and flying swiftly to leave us again alone.

But never we can be lonely for God. Always he is Presence. If we sit on a hill and view the wide quiet of a landscape, he is Presence therein. "Would not all fade away altogether, were we left for one moment really alone in it?" If we look into the heavens at night where the stars call forth their hosts without number, God is with us therein, who inhabiteth Eternity and Infinity. If we go to our fellow men, there, in you, in me, in all, in the solemnness of crowds, is the same Mystery, Life, Presence, Power, Peace, One in the Many, Infinity in the finite, Eternity in Time. "If we ascend into heaven, he is there; if we make our bed in the grave, behold he is there; if we take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the sea, even there doth his hand lead us and his right hand doth hold us." Unto love to God never is lacking the Presence of the Lord. "In the secret of his tabernacle" we are, "in the secret

place of the Most High, under the shadow of the Almighty."

Now, by these reflections it is plain that we cannot love God as we love each other. This never ought to be commanded or expected. Looking back at my own experience, I would counsel that it is unwise and wrong to urge children to love God. Unable to analyse and think, they will be only pained and confused, perhaps frightened and distressed, the conscience troubled and perplexed. Even perhaps the heart will be hardened and the sweet naturalness of religious unfolding distorted or destroyed. Let the mind be directed to divine beauty and filled with reverence for goodness. Then adoration, aspiration, worship, sense of the Infinite divine presence, peace and joy will follow naturally and fervently. Love of virtue, love of truth, love of beauty, love of love, is love of God, for these are his being. When they are beheld glorifying all the works of God, shining everywhere, and the divine, impending, encompassing Spirit is known, then follows adoration of Him, the source and being of us, the Father divine. And when, with single eye and pure devotion, all the power of the mind is devoted to the truth, and all the reverence of the soul rises unto the beautiful, and all the might of the moral judgment is in council for the right, and all the mercy and love of the heart pour forth to our fellow men,—then we love God, as we are commanded, with all the heart and all the soul and all the mind and all the strength. Then we know that this truly is "the first and great commandment."

